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ABSTRACT

Smart Start is North Carolina's partnership between state government and local leaders, service providers, and families to better serve children under 6 years of age and their families. A formative evaluation of the Smart Start process, to inform the current state-level decision-making processes for future Smart Start efforts, was devised from a content analysis of notes and documents from the evaluation team's experiences in Year 1 of the program. The content analysis identified seven themes related to the evaluation team's perspective on the first year of Smart Start with regard to organizational structure, focus, planning process, decision-making process, state-county relations, local team diversity, and technical assistance. Patterns examined within each category provided the outline for recommendations. Recommendations include: (1) the inclusion of nontraditional stakeholders on the board to influence decisions; (2) clarification of the focus before the state funds additional demonstration programs; (3) viewing planning as a critical component of program success; (4) local evaluation of teams' satisfaction with the decision-making process; (5) an in-depth analysis of the contract approval process to identify problems causing delays; (6) the use of educational activities to bridge the knowledge gap among team members; and (7) provision of systematic technical assistance regarding the content of local plans and strategies. Reactions to the report from team leaders and executive directors, county collaboration coaches, and the Department of Human Resources are appended.) (KB)

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EMERGING THEMES AND LESSONS LEARNED:

THE FIRST YEAR OF SMART START

Report to the Department of Human Resources

by the Smart Start Evaluation Team

Distributed: May 24, 1994

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This report was written by Kelly Maxwell, Donna Bryant, Amee Adkins, Brian McCadden, and George Noblit, although it is based on observations and input from all evaluation team members over the course of our first months working with counties. A list of evaluation team members is attached.

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EMERGING THEMES AND LESSONS LEARNED: THE FIRST YEAR OF SMART START

In the eight months since the announcement of the 12 programs (representing 18 counties plus the Qualla Boundary Cherokee Indian Reservation) selected to begin implementing Smart Start, leaders in these demonstration counties have studied and discussed their local needs and resources, planned strategies to improve the lives of young children, aged birth through 5, and their families, and have begun program implementation. The process has been time-consuming and labor-intensive, both for local and state Smart Start participants. With the end of this first phase of Smart Start and the possibility of more counties receiving Smart Start funds, it is timely to consider some of the issues that emerged and lessons learned during the first demonstration year.

The original Smart Start legislation calls for both summative and formative evaluations of Smart Start. The Smart Start evaluation team has spent the past eight months obtaining information and formulating ideas for both types of evaluation. For the summative evaluation regarding the outcomes of Smart Start, the evaluation team has been designing an evaluation plan that will appropriately address the various county initiatives. The evaluation plan will be submitted in a separate report to the State. The purpose of this report is to provide a formative evaluation of the Smart Start process that can inform the current state-level decision-making processes for future Smart Start efforts.

The conclusions in this report are based on the Smart Start evaluation team members' thoughts and experiences regarding the first year's process, as each of us has worked with an individual county. Information for this report was based primarily on notes from our interactions with local Smart Start teams. Members of the evaluation team had regular contact with local Smart Start team members through phone conversations, site visits, and statewide county collaboration meetings. Information for this report was also obtained from notes of the DHR core team meetings we attended and from documents created by local teams (e.g., original

application proposals, short- and long-term plans, articles of incorporation, needs and resources assessment summaries). To prepare this report, three team members reviewed all notes and coded statements into various categories. From this analysis, the major categories became the 7 emerging themes discussed in this report. An additional level of analysis was conducted to examine patterns within each category. These patterns provided the outline of the discussion and recommendations in this report.

This report represents the evaluation team's perspective of the first year of Smart Start. The perspectives of team leaders, executive directors, and county collaboration coaches was obtained in the form of feedback to this report and has been summarized in the appendix. The themes and lessons learned are organized under the following seven headings: organizational structure, focus, planning process, decision-making process, state-county relations, local team diversity, and technical assistance.

Organizational Structure

Counties formed a planning team during the application phase of Smart Start. This planning team is evolving into a local partnership board with 17 of the membership slots required by the State to be employees of specific organizations (e.g., schools, social service agencies) or representatives of specific groups (e.g., parents, child care providers). In the start-up phase between being selected as a Smart Start pilot project and implementing the short term plan, counties differed in their initial organizational structure. Some county Smart Start teams operated independently during the start-up phase and never allied themselves with a particular public or non-profit agency. Other counties temporarily allied themselves with an already existing agency that assumed responsibility for some day-to-day operations, such as secretarial support and office expenses, as the county completed the steps necessary to become an independent non-profit organization. One county formally tied its partnership to an existing non-profit organization by adapting the board of the existing organization to meet the Smart Start board structure requirements, rather than creating a new non-profit, tax-exempt entity. At least

one other county considered this option of formally aligning itself with an existing non-profit organization.

Operating with an existing non-profit may provide advantages as enumerated by some advocates of this approach. Space, utilities, and supplies could be shared. The people most interested or qualified to be on the partnership board might already be serving on the existing board. The direction and momentum already established by the existing board could be built upon by the new Smart Start partnership board. However, despite these possible advantages, county Smart Start partnership boards that are tied to another organization may not be as independent as stand-alone partnership boards. Some Smart Start partnership board members may feel compelled to respond to the needs of the other organization as well as to those of young children and families. Conflict of interest issues could also arise if the existing organization is considered for Smart Start funding. This joint board structure could mean that there are more constraints, less flexibility, and less creativity in Smart Start decision-making.

Recommendations

- **The State should encourage local partnerships to establish independent boards**. For counties that are not yet receiving Smart Start funds, independent partnership status should be a requirement in the application process.
- **To minimize the potential of making decisions in response to agency pressures, and to maintain the partnerships' focus on young children and their families, nontraditional stakeholders such as parents, direct service providers, and business leaders must be board members who have real power to influence decisions**. Increasing the number of board members who are nontraditional stakeholders can be one way of minimizing the agency pressure on decision-making while maintaining the focus on young children and families. Another way of increasing the power of nontraditional stakeholders is to include community-identified leaders from these groups (e.g., parents) on the board. People who are leaders in their community will likely have more power on the board because they represent a defined constituency and may already be familiar with team and leadership roles.

Focus

Determining the focus (or major foci) of Smart Start has been an evolutionary process. Initially, Smart Start was described very broadly. Gradually, some limits and therefore some focus evolved. For example, some teams needed clarification that children under 5 and their families were the intended recipients, rather than all children.

Aspects of Smart Start are sometimes described as child-focused (i.e., efforts to improve early childhood care and education), family-focused (i.e., efforts to provide family support services through family resource centers), or systems-focused (i.e., efforts to integrate services), as if those are separable foci. Children, families, and systems are each critical components of the Smart Start initiative, yet they are difficult "targets" to address simultaneously. Some local Smart Start teams have appeared to be primarily "child-focused," although they still must deal with family and systems issues. As the team chooses strategies most likely to result in changes in children's lives, their plan might well include programs such as parenting education and transportation system improvements. Are the most effective strategies aimed toward the service delivery system, families, or children themselves? Which strategies will most likely lead to the most improvements in children's lives? Teams have struggled with these issues and decisions.

Struggles at the local level have been exacerbated because similar conversations regarding the goals and focus of Smart Start have occurred simultaneously at the state level. Leadership for Smart Start efforts has come from three sources within DHR--the Secretary's office and the Divisions of Child Development and Family Development. Direction has also come from the Governor's office and the Legislature, first through the enabling legislation as well as through ongoing oversight and interest in Smart Start, as well as from the NC Partnership for Children. With so many different individuals urging and hoping that Smart Start efforts will meet certain needs, it has been difficult for county teams to get a sense of the main direction of Smart Start.

Realizing that Smart Start cannot be all things to all people, the Department eventually delineated (in March, 1994) a set of components that must be a part of each partnership's plan:

providing services for low-income families who do not need or want child care for their children, raising the amount of child care subsidies, and demonstrating collaborative efforts within the county. The "must haves" list (as it is being called) appeared to be a reaction to the widely disparate ideas proposed by counties and an attempt by the State to focus local efforts.

Although local partnerships are discussing children, families, and systems, efforts appear to be focused primarily on services. Almost all of the county plans involve expanding or supplementing already existing services and programs, with relatively few plans directed toward linking services into a cohesive system or creating a unique, non-agency sponsored solution to a problem. This focus on already existing services is not surprising, given that local partnerships are comprised of several agency personnel and money is usually tied to particular agencies or programs. However, local leaders must expand their perspectives beyond existing services if they are to maximize the improvements in children and families' lives. Teams must begin thinking simultaneously about the end results (i.e., outcomes) as well as the means to the end (i.e., particular strategies/plans/programs). With the immense task of developing both short-term and long-term plans, it is easy to become overly focused on the strategies to achieving outcomes and lose sight of the intended outcomes.

Recommendations

- **The State needs to clarify its focus before additional demonstration programs are funded**. State-level Smart Start staff must decide what is expected of local partnerships and must clearly communicate these expectations to Smart Start teams, in order to prevent the frustrations of local partnership members who learn, after considerable effort, that they must shift their focus. It is understandable that many leaders would have been involved in setting the ground rules in the pilot year of Smart Start, but a more streamlined process of decision-making must be developed soon in order to sustain the program over a number of years.
- **County team members should receive training to enable them to move from a "service" focus toward a "systems" focus, keeping children and families as their priority**. The State has funded the county collaboration process to help local teams work together and plan

during their first year of Smart Start. The county collaboration process has helped team members think about solving problems in creative, nontraditional ways. More focus on linking or creating systems should be incorporated into team training. This training will need to be periodic because shifting from a services approach to a systems approach cannot be accomplished with a one-time workshop. Training should include several opportunities for team members to talk among themselves about particular issues relevant to their county or fears concerning their own job if new or different systems were developed. Although this training is especially important for all board members, team leaders, and executive directors, further education and training are also necessary for other key service personnel who are not involved with Smart Start but whose jobs will be affected by partnership board decisions. Agency staff, for instance, may believe their partnership representative should advocate for additional funding for their own agency's programs and may not support the representative's decisions unless they understand the rationale. In addition to specific efforts targeted towards encouraging a systems approach, teams should maintain their focus on children and families by continually asking themselves, "...and how is this strategy/plan/program affecting children and families?"

Planning Process

Local Smart Start teams have spent the first months developing their short-term plans for spending the first year's fiscal allocation while simultaneously planning for the long term. Working on both activities at the same time has been challenging for counties and seems to have made some decisions more difficult. Although first-year funding may be necessary to bring county leaders together and to provide immediate, needed support for county services, it also hinders the ability of teams to plan for the long term. For example, teams have had to make decisions about spending this year's funds before they have developed and prioritized their own goals. Thus, some decisions made earlier in the year may not match a county's current goals, and some early funding decisions may overly influence a county's later decisions about long-term goals.

Developing the short-term and long-term plans within the state timelines has been an enormous activity for local teams. Most teams have broken the activity into smaller, more manageable pieces. In some instances, counties have developed task forces or subcommittees for various topics (e.g., family support services, child care) and have assigned tasks to each subcommittee. Dividing tasks among team members can be a useful, productive strategy for accomplishing tasks as long as a large number of team members are involved in the process. The tasks remain enormous if the same team members are on several subcommittees. This approach to the work distribution also contributes to the segmentation of the plan and the emphasis on already existing services rather than systems.

As difficult and time-consuming as it is to develop short- and long-term plans, the first year of local planning also requires community outreach and collaboration building. Smart Start clearly intends to bring community members together to address the needs of young children and their families. However, bringing people with diverse ideas together to make decisions--often for the first time--can be a difficult, time consuming process in and of itself. This aspect of Smart Start has been a lower priority compared to the immediate need for counties to decide how to best use this year's financial allocation.

The timeline of implementation of Smart Start has also been a major challenge for the DHR Smart Start staff. A large project like Smart Start in which state staff are trying not to do "business as usual" requires careful, long-term planning and preparation for themselves prior to local implementation. Local team members have been urged to collaborate, yet state agencies have not combined or streamlined their own program-entry paperwork or overcome confidentiality barriers that would support local level collaboration. Unfortunately, DHR staff had little time to plan and prepare adequately for Smart Start before it was implemented. Instead, state-level staff have primarily had to "think on their feet" about policies and procedures regarding Smart Start. Without planning time, state-level Smart Start staff have primarily reacted to problems rather than acted proactively to prevent problems. Implementation has

proceeded remarkably well, given these limitations, but more planning time at the state level (and more staff) would have facilitated the start-up process.

Recommendations

- **Planning--including the resources needed to plan--must be seen as a critical component of Smart Start success**. The State should designate the first year of Smart Start participation as a planning year in which financial support is provided primarily for planning, with some limited financial support provided for essential services. The majority of the money should not be allocated to the local partnerships until they have completed their planning year. By limiting funds during the initial year, counties could use their time and energy to bring together various members of the community, develop collaboration skills, prioritize their goals, and plan for the future without the burden of having to make major funding decisions quickly. The small short-term financial allocation could provide an opportunity for team members to "practice" their collaboration and decision-making skills.
- **The time between a county's selection as a Smart Start participant and the receipt of initial funds should be considerably shortened and a small initial financial allotment should be given to counties immediately after they have been selected to cover basic operating costs such as long distance telephone calls.** Given the enormous personal commitment needed by team members to accomplish all the tasks in developing their short-term plans, individuals should not also have to contribute financially to the effort.
- **To continue successfully implementing Smart Start initiatives in more counties, planning efforts within DHR must be supported, in terms of both increased time and staff.** Planning for the state should include a discussion of the new role state agencies hope to play in state-county relations, the systemic changes needed at the state level to accommodate the new "bottom-up" approach to government, and the required resources for bringing about the state-level changes. With the current state process, staff do not have time to reflect and plan; if they take the time to do so, they lengthen an already long process of allocating funds to counties. Thus, to meet the immediate needs of the counties, planning

time is forsaken. However, if state-level planning is not accommodated in the long run, state and local Smart Start efforts will be less effective.

Decision-Making Process

Local partnerships have developed formal as well as informal decision-making processes. When local teams incorporated, their partnership board became the formal decision-making body. However, many counties have a planning team and/or subcommittees that are very involved in developing initial proposals and making recommendations to the board regarding particular decisions. In some counties, subcommittee recommendations are approved by the board with minor discussion; in others, board members discuss at length each recommendation before voting. These different approaches can create tension between those team members who want to make decisions efficiently by relying on subcommittee recommendations vs. those who want all members to be involved in the consideration of all decisions at all levels.

Although the formal decision-making process is relatively easy to identify since it follows the organizational structure, the informal decision-making process is much more difficult to discern. For instance, there are key people on teams who clearly play critical roles in making decisions, but the way they influence the formal decision process is unclear. There are also team members who seem to have little say in decision-making. Low-income parents, for example, often comprise only one or two board positions, and may be less likely to challenge leaders' recommendations.

Both the formal and informal decision-making processes impact teams. Although these processes are present in every team, several questions regarding the effects of particular decision-making processes remain unanswered at this time: Can teams continue making decisions like they have made them during this past year? Which, if any, decisions can be "un-made" in the future (e.g., can teams fund projects in the short term without funding them in the long term)? Are low-income parents and front-line service providers involved in the decision-making process? How are new people brought into the decision-making process? This latter question

has been particularly important recently as the partnerships have hired their executive director, who may not have been involved in the initial 6-8 months of planning.

Recommendations

- **Local partnerships should re-visit their decision making process and evaluate team members' satisfaction with the current process**. Do team members think it is reasonable to continue making decisions within the current process? Teams will need to adopt a decision-making process that not only is effective and expedient but one that can be sustained over the next several years. It is unreasonable to expect that the incredible efforts made by many team members during the first 8 months of Smart Start can continue for the duration of the endeavor.
- **The diversity of decision makers within the team must continue to expand**. More nontraditional stakeholders, especially parents, must be involved in the Smart Start decision-making process because the decisions made by the partnership board will directly effect the lives of parents of children under 5.

State-County Relations

State leaders involved in Smart Start have described it as being a "bottom-up" rather than "top-down" approach; the State is not making decisions for a county but rather is recognizing the county's ability to make its own decisions. During the initial months of Smart Start, state officials repeatedly assured team members that they would be allowed to make their own decisions. However, in reality, the State is making some decisions about Smart Start, and the counties are making other decisions. For example, at the end of March (six months into the effort) a "Must Haves" list, summarizing a "few key expectations for Smart Start long-term plans" from the Department of Human Resources, was circulated to county team leaders.

This delayed refinement of State expectations illustrates the changing rules of Smart Start over time. From the local perspective, these changing rules are very frustrating because of the mixed messages they send. For example, team members can infer from the "must haves" list that the State did not really mean that counties would be allowed to make decisions, yet counties

were making various decisions during the initial months of Smart Start with very few guidelines from the State, even though they had requested guidelines. The change in rules at the end of the first year has damaged the trust between the counties and the State. Local team members are likely to doubt the State's sincerity of creating a "bottom-up" approach for Smart Start and to continue wondering about other, hidden expectations of the State.

Another issue affecting state-county relations is the contract process necessary for counties to receive funds to implement their Smart Start initiatives. Specifically, county partnerships have to submit written plans and budgets for each project, which must be reviewed and approved by the State before a formal contract can be made between the State and the county. Once a contract has been established for a project, the county can receive funds for that project. The number of contracts required for each county is much larger than anticipated--and is much greater than the number of contracts DHR usually processes. To cope with the burgeoning number of Smart Start contracts (over 200 for the first year), state-level staff have tried to shorten the time required to review and approve county plans by placing pressure on the state contracting system. On occasion, dozens of staff members have been pulled away from their other responsibilities to help reduce the backlog. However, the number of steps in the contracting system has not been drastically shortened. This pressurized system cannot sustain itself. The need for adaptation becomes especially critical if additional counties are going to receive Smart Start funds during the upcoming years. Adapting the current state system will require shortening the contract process, reorganization, and/or additional Smart Start staff with DHR.

Two other options have been mentioned as possible solutions to the contract problem. The first option requires the local partnerships to be responsible for contracts within their county. This would shift the contract burden from the State to the counties, seemingly solving the State's problem but creating a significant problem for the counties. The local partnerships do not have the personnel, financial resources, or legal and accounting expertise needed to write and monitor contracts. If counties were required to write their own contracts, the State would have to provide technical assistance. The expense of providing the level of technical assistance necessary to

ensure that counties followed legal contracting guidelines would most likely outweigh the benefits to the State. Even if counties were able to follow the legal guidelines, the potential conflict of interest inherent in having team members contract with local agencies and organizations would always be problematic.

A second option is to contract with an independent, non-profit organization to process Smart Start contracts. This option is attractive because (a) neither the state-level Smart Start staff nor the local partnerships would be involved in the day-to-day contract process, and (b) a non-profit organization should be able to contract with counties more quickly than the State. However, if this option is pursued, the State would need to remain involved in the contracting process and retain accountability for the process. If problems arise in the contracting process, someone at the State must be able to take responsibility for solving the problems quickly. This solution does not totally eliminate the need for the State to reconsider its Smart Start budgeting process.

Initially, county frustrations about the Smart Start process (e.g., length of time needed to receive money from the State; number of steps involved in approving plans and writing contracts; inconsistent answers, both across counties and within DHR, about what types of proposals could be funded) seemed to be primarily directed at state-level Smart Start staff. However, over time, this somewhat adversarial relationship seems to have evolved into an alliance in which state and local level Smart Start participants are seen as being on the same "team" working together to change the bureaucratic system. This "friend vs. foe" perception of the State vacillates over time, typically with counties viewing the State as "foe" when they are feeling most frustrated. It seems inevitable that the State will play a scapegoating function in the process: counties need an outlet for their frustration and the State is the easy outlet.

Recommendations

- **The problem of contracting must be solved. Either the State contract system must be changed or another contract system must be developed.** The State must recognize the vast amount of work necessary within state agencies to plan and implement Smart Start. The

multiple state-level steps necessary for approving county plans, establishing contracts, and allocating funds cannot be accomplished efficiently within the current system. An in-depth analysis of the contract approval process--specifically *vis a vis* Smart Start proposals--should be conducted to determine the specific problems that caused delays.

- **The proposal review process within the DHR must be more collaborative.** The regular review meetings established within the DHR were a strong step in the right direction. These county review meetings need to be attended by representatives at the division and department levels who have the authority to make decisions or revisions (without review by yet another person) so that timely and consistent decisions regarding contract approval can be made. As "rules" evolve during this process (i.e., certain types of programs cannot be supported with Smart Start funds), these rules should be made known to the county participants.
- **To help alleviate some of the factors contributing to the contract problem, local partnerships could, over time, find new ways to collapse several contracts into a few contracts.** For instance, instead of having separate contracts for each project, teams could combine similar projects into one contract handled by one organization. Decisions to collapse contracts should be made carefully, though, and with full partnership team participation to insure that the decision is in the best interests of the partnership. The advantages of speed and convenience in collapsing contracts may be outweighed by the disadvantages associated with one agency or organization being perceived (however erroneously) as "too powerful."
- **Additional Smart Start staff are needed within DHR.** Advising county Smart Start teams, providing assistance with their plans and proposals, and reviewing and monitoring counties' work through proposal evaluation and field trips are tasks currently performed by 3 professional staff members in the Division of Child Development and 2 in the Division of Family Development (some of whom have other responsibilities as well). As new Smart Start counties are added into the collaboration, these individuals will take on more responsibilities, while not giving up their contacts with the first 12 programs. As their efforts

are spread too thin, counties are likely to become frustrated with what they perceive as lack of responsiveness; the effectiveness of the overall Smart Start effort could be diminished.

Local Team Diversity

Smart Start provides an opportunity for counties to bring together a diverse group of people to work toward improving the lives of young children and their families in communities. This opportunity is also a great challenge for teams. One of the initial challenges has been to bring together the state-prescribed board members, educate them about the Smart Start initiative, and enable them to see the importance of their active participation in the initiative. In forging these new relationships across the communities, teams are encountering problems ranging from general logistics (e.g., finding a time in which everyone can meet) to resistance (e.g., a key player may not see the importance of her participation).

Although diversity, including ethnic and professional diversity, is pursued by teams, members with the most decision-making power are often from similar rather than different backgrounds. For example, the State requires various agency representatives (e.g., health department, social services) to join the local partnership board. Although these agency representatives represent diverse services provided in the community, they share a relatively common knowledge, vocabulary, and culture (i.e., the agency culture) that other team members, such as parents, are less likely to understand. The agency representatives on the board are often community leaders as well, a status that may lead nontraditional stakeholders on the board to be unwilling to challenge their ideas. Nontraditional stakeholders may also be less able to influence board decisions because of lack of knowledge about team decision processes or sheer lack of numbers. Smart Start counties continue to pursue diversity on their decision-making body, but without a shared understanding, individual team members can have difficulty working together to make decisions about improving the lives of young children and their families.

By state mandate, the board members who represent agencies must have the authority to commit their agency to Smart Start efforts. Thus, most agency representatives on the partnership boards are agency directors. Although agency directors must be involved in decision making if

long-term system change is to occur, their presence may mean the absence of other critical agency representatives. Direct service providers, such as front-line workers in child care, social services, and health professions, are important Smart Start stakeholders who may be outside of the decision-making process.

Some local teams are also dealing with the issue of diversity of geographic location of board members. Because government offices and some services are located in the county seat and many team members are selected because of their affiliation with those agencies, many team members live and work in the county seat. Other communities in the county may be under-represented or not represented at all on the board.

Recommendations

- **Educational activities may be useful in bridging the knowledge gap among team members**. Local team members should share with each other their various perspectives, including definitions of commonly used terms and agency decision-making processes. All such acculturation activities should be provided in an appropriate environment in which people feel safe and comfortable to speak openly and ask honest questions. At the state level, sessions at regional or statewide Smart Start conferences could address some of the skills necessary to be an effective team member. Possible topics could include public speaking, negotiation, and conflict resolution skills. Other training opportunities, such as Covey Leadership Training, may also be useful to team members. If new Smart Start projects are funded this year, current Smart Start team members are natural mentors for these acculturation activities. For example, parents who have participated on Smart Start teams could talk to other parents about their experiences and the lessons they have learned. Such activities will be required periodically as new people join Smart Start teams and boards.
- **If the purpose of diversity is to ensure that various members of the community are part of the decision-making process, then the State and counties should revise the current method for operationalizing diversity**. Currently, the State has defined diversity by requiring certain categories of people to be on partnership boards (e.g., health department

director, school superintendent). This mandated board diversity has ensured that various groups, in name at least, are involved in Smart Start. However, usually only one person from each designated group is represented on the board. While some board members such as agency representatives may feel comfortable sharing their opinions with the team, other members such as parents may not feel as comfortable voicing their opinions. Although larger numbers of nontraditional stakeholders will not alone address this problem (i.e., all low-income parents on a board would not be expected to agree with each other), the county teams must broaden their concept of diversity. County and state Smart Start participants should think carefully about the intended purpose of team diversity and its relationship to decision-making power.

Technical Assistance

The Smart Start initiative was designed to enable communities to decide the best strategies for improving the lives of young children and their families. Teams are being supported in their planning through the county collaboration process, which provides technical assistance regarding the process of working together as a team. Technical assistance regarding evaluation issues is provided by the Smart Start evaluation team. However, counties perceive that little technical assistance is being provided regarding the content of their plans. The original intention of enabling counties to make their own decisions may have overshadowed the potential usefulness of providing information to counties. For example, local teams may want to improve young children's developmental skills in order to better prepare them for school but may not know which particular strategy--home visiting programs, child care programs, or a combination of the two--would most likely lead to these improvements. At this point, counties must decide for themselves which strategies to use. Other topics that counties have struggled with--and asked for technical assistance about--include improving/starting transportation systems (especially for rural counties), streamlining the paperwork involved in proving eligibility for programs, including children with special needs in their child care quality improvement plans, and linking preschool efforts with public school efforts. Two-hour workshops at the county collaboration

meetings were only a start for the counties to begin their efforts in these areas. They needed and wanted in their first year, and may continue to need and want, sources of "expert" help in specific areas.

In an attempt to address the need for technical assistance, a loosely knit support team of state, university, and county human services professionals was brought together in the fall of 1993 to help counties plan and implement their new efforts. However, it was implemented in a reactive fashion and is not really an active "team" in its organization. County team members are not clear about whom to call for help or what can be expected, and have expressed frustration and sometimes disappointment over the responses they have obtained. Support team members are quite knowledgeable and want to be useful, but have few avenues for providing input, other than already established professional contacts. A more coherent system of technical assistance is needed.

Recommendations

- **Technical assistance regarding the content of local plans and strategies should be provided in a systematic way.** Occasional workshops at county collaboration meetings are helpful but not enough to truly inform and support change. Ongoing technical assistance is needed. This assistance could not only provide information to teams but could also help maintain each team's focus on the needs of young children and their families. Technical assistance regarding the content and focus of local plans could be very useful to local partnerships and could be provided without interfering with their ability to make their own decisions about improving the lives of young children and their families. The already established Smart Start Support Team could more systematically assume responsibility for providing technical assistance, but it would need to create an organized process for doing so. This will be difficult because current members, each with full-time commitments apart from Smart Start, are from a wide variety of state and county agencies and universities. A single agency or organization, such as the North Carolina Partnership for Children or the Division of Child Development, could also be asked to coordinate and provide technical assistance. To do so, the

organization would need staff specifically assigned to assimilate and disseminate information and expertise to counties.

Concluding Remarks

We have tried to summarize in this report the major challenges faced by Smart Start participants, at both the local and state level, in the first year of Smart Start planning and implementation. Although many of the challenges will continue into the second year for the already funded programs, one of the purposes of this report was to suggest modifications to the process that might benefit counties to be funded in the future. Another purpose was to help the currently funded counties focus on existing challenges. Those involved in the process will certainly recognize these issues. We hope that this report can be a springboard for county and state participants to discuss the challenges and possible solutions.

APPENDIX: REACTIONS TO THE LESSONS LEARNED REPORT

The Emerging Themes and Lessons Learned report was distributed in May, 1994, to local Smart Start team leaders and executive directors, team coaches, and DHR staff. Approximately 45 people received the report and all were asked for feedback which was to be incorporated into the final version. Eight people provided feedback to the evaluation team: 3 coaches, 2 team leaders, 2 team members, and 1 person from DHR. Some of the comments were general (i.e., expressing approval of the report) and did not require revision of the text; others pointed out factual errors in the report which we have now corrected. Other comments will be mentioned briefly here in this appendix, following the same organizational headings used in the report.

General Comments

Three respondents suggested that other topics be discussed in the report, including the County Collaboration process, strategic planning, the role of coaches, the role of the NC Partnership board, state-level staff preparation, and Covey Leadership Training. Several of these topics are being covered in 60 key informant interviews that are being conducted in the summer of 1994 (5 people in each of the 12 projects). The written report based upon these interviews will summarize opinions on these topics.

Some of the questions reflected a need or desire to know more specifically which county was being referred to in a given section. We have tried throughout our evaluation process and will always try to protect the anonymity of specific people, projects, and when possible, counties/regions. We believe that this improves our ability to gather honest information about the process and implementation, and it decreases the tendency for counties/regions to compete with each other.

One person thought that some of our statements were our opinions rather than facts. We have tried to fairly report the differing procedures we saw and opinions we heard in the counties implementing Smart Start. Based on these observations, we have indeed stated here our opinions about the plans, procedures, rules, regulations, successes and challenges of an effort of this size

and breadth. As we have all learned during this first year, differing viewpoints and experiences are being melded into the final plan within each county/region and the State.

Organizational Structure

Several comments concerned nontraditional stakeholders. Some reviewers wanted us to provide a specific number of nontraditional stakeholders (e.g., parents) that would be sufficient to increase their decision-making power on the board. Although we, too, wish that there was a magic recipe to follow for ensuring adequate, truly participatory involvement of low-income parents and other non-traditional stakeholders on policy-setting or decision-making boards, neither research or practice gives us information with which to recommend a particular number. The involvement of nontraditional stakeholders seems to vary by their history of involvement in a given county, level of effort made by the team to listen to and include parents, skills and experiences of the parents involved, and the ability of the first few parents to enthusiastically and actively help in the recruitment of others. Most counties acknowledge the need to make more concerted efforts in this coming year to reach out to low-income parents.

We agree with the reviewers who suggested that increasing the numbers of nontraditional stakeholders would not necessarily lead to increased power and that additional training and support would be needed. Our section on decision-making also addressed this topic.

Focus

Some concern was raised about our statement that children, families, and systems are difficult "targets" to address simultaneously. Legislation authorizing various programs, both state and federal, often requires programs and systems to serve different units (children or families), with different eligibility qualifications and reporting requirements. People who primarily work with families or primarily with young children are often trained from different backgrounds, for example, social work or early childhood education. Staying focused on one problem area sometimes occurs at the expense of addressing another. Methods of evaluating family, child and system progress are often quite different. Finally, different advocacy groups, to maximize their impact, tend to focus on specific constituencies with less thought given to the

entire family unit within the social and community system. These are many of the reasons that maintaining a broad focus for the county plans has been difficult. In addition, the practical point of view that "we have to start somewhere" and that all the ills of society cannot be cured with Smart Start funding has lead some teams to begin where they know to begin, with plans to build on early work and gradually or rapidly expand, depending on their early successes and ongoing community commitment.

One person suggested that local-level agency personnel receive training and support for interagency collaboration. Part of the support must come from state-level agency staff; funding regulations need to be more flexible if local collaboration is to occur.

Planning Process

Comments made to this section reiterated the importance of reducing the options for spending the first year funds because those efforts not only impeded the development of a collaborative team and its need to effectively plan for the long-term but also contributed to burn out.

Decision-Making Process

One respondent highlighted the need to include more parents on the board because their opinions are essential for innovation and effective decision-making. In general we believe this to be true and hope that our comments about non-traditional stakeholders in the sections on Organizational Structure and County Team Diversity also sufficiently reflect this view.

State-County Relations

There were more comments made to this section than any other, 6 in all. We believe that this reflects the fact that the reviewers, like most people within the Smart Start network in the first year, were frustrated by the sometimes adversarial nature of the state-county interactions. Most people perceived this as stemming from the perception of team members at the county level that the state-level Smart Start staff sent mixed messages to the teams. To many the Smart Start decision-making process seemed "top-down" rather than "bottom up." One respondent believed that the state-county relationship was influenced by factors other than frustration about the Smart

Start process. People in state and county agencies have had a long history of working together and have developed stereotypes of "the state" and "the county," which may also promote an adversarial relationship. State-level staff within all agencies, not just DHR, may need training and ongoing supervision that emphasizes their role as collaborators with local partnerships. One respondent thought that local teams could be responsible for processing their own contracts if the state provided adequate support. Legal support would need to be provided by someone at the state-level who was familiar with Smart Start; local lawyers could provide inconsistent advice to teams because they are unfamiliar with Smart Start.

County Team Diversity

Additional suggestions about addressing diversity and building trust were included by two respondents. One pointed out that reducing the time required for the short-term plan should free some time for increasing team diversity, in terms of diversity in people as well as opinions. Another suggested that Covey training did provide help in this area, but that not all team members could participate.

Technical Assistance

Supporting the need for more technical assistance, one respondent recommended that technical assistance be provided by someone who has (or can) develop a personal relationship with local team members. If technical assistance is offered on a "call if you need us" basis, it is likely to be underutilized because team members are too busy and may not know what kind of assistance is available or how best to access this assistance. However, if the person providing technical assistance regularly interacts with team members, information could be provided when issues arise.

Final Comments

We want to thank those who provided feedback to the initial draft of this report. We have used this appendix to relay their comments, along with out thoughts, about the issues raised in the report. All involved hope that the lessons learned during this first year of Smart Start will guide the State and local partnerships, both new and old, throughout the upcoming year.